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C O N F I D E N T I A L DHAKA 003982

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PHUM BG

SUBJECT: RECENT CASES OF DISTURBANCES FOR MINORITY COMMUNITIES

Classified By: Econ Chief David Renz, reason 1.4(d)

¶1. (U) In the space of six weeks, there have been three reported cases of disturbances in minority communities in different parts of Bangladesh: a forced eviction of 65 indigenous and Hindu families in Dinajpur District, north west Bangladesh; Christian owned shops set on fire in Barisal Division, south Bangladesh; and a forced eviction of approximately 300 people in the Moulovibazar district, north east Bangladesh.

¶2. (SBU) On June 22, government officials evicted 65 families from their land in order to establish a government project in the same place. According to press reports, the 65 evicted families consisted of 15 families from the indigenous Santali Christian community and 50 Hindu families. Sanjeeb Drong, General Secretary for Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples Forum, told poloff that the government project is the construction of a "model village" where they would relocate 150 families from other areas and construct low-cost housing. Drong said after garnering support from local media and other activist groups, the evicted families returned to the land on July 25 in an unsuccessful effort to reclaim the area. While all the homes on the land have been destroyed, the government has not started building and the project is still pending according to Drong.

¶3. (U) On July 23, according to press reports four Christian owned stores were burnt down in the Barisal area. The motivations behind the arson attack are unclear. One of the shop owners was missing for a few days, but has now returned. He has not, however, spoken publicly of why he had disappeared. Police have arrested five people in connection with the arson case.

¶4. (SBU) On Aug 3, forest department officials, reportedly, together with local Bengali settlers, forcibly removed approximately 300 indigenous Khasia people from their land in the Moulovibazar district and destroyed some of their betel leaf gardens. According to local press reports, forest department officials also destroyed betel leaf gardens, the main source of income for Khasias in that region, on July 27.

Father Joseph Gomes, a local activist, told poloff that the Khasia families had taken lease of the land and were paying taxes but forest department officials maintained that the Khasias had been living and cultivating betel leaf on forest department land. Gomes said Khasia leaders have filed a suit against the government.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: Three incidents involving Bangladesh's minority communities in less than six weeks is unusual. While individually notable, this cluster does not necessarily signal a trend of increasing hostilities towards minority communities. We will continue to monitor the treatment of minority communities closely. END COMMENT

CHAMMAS